

MAYOR SHARES VISION FOR KALISPELL

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After only a couple of weeks in office, Kalispell Mayor Mark Johnson is getting a feel for the position and he has some priorities in mind for the city.

"It's kind of interesting," he said of being mayor. "It feels strange having people address me as 'mayor.' I am Mark."

But Johnson confidently took the gavel to smoothly run his first City Council meeting.

A financial adviser with a background as a certified public accountant and a real estate developer, Johnson has also been involved with Rotary and he was chairman of the North Valley Hospital Board of Directors for several years.

"Through that experience, I got familiar with running a meeting," said Johnson, a Republican who ran unopposed for the mayor's position.

Johnson said he feels fortunate that his predecessor, Tammi Fisher, and the council guided the city into a sound financial condition, building a healthy reserve fund, and that the divisive airport expansion issue is a thing of the past.

Johnson said he would prefer to muse about a vision for the future of the city.

"Generally, I'm really excited about some of the things we are seeing in downtown Kalispell," he said. "I want to create an environment where it's enticing for a developer to come in and redevelop downtown Kalispell."

Specifically, Johnson sees great promise in Kalispell's ambitious core area revitalization plan, which involves removing the railroad tracks that run east and west through the center of town and using the "core" for developing better walkways, more green space, better street connectivity and parking.

Johnson describes it as a "mixed-used walking community" and he envisions it would be attractive for commercial development, especially for professional office space.

What sets the initiative apart from other planning efforts, Johnson said, is that it has been driven by input from downtown businesses and property owners.



Mark Johnson, the new mayor takes the oath of office on Monday evening, January 6, at City Hall in Kalispell. (Brenda Ahearn/Daily Inter Lake)

"Normally, people are very leery of top-down planning," he said, adding that the plan is indeed being developed by the city but it has significant buy-in from the public.

"I think it's tremendous," he said. "That's a big thing I'm excited about. We're looking forward to the future."

Johnson considers completing the U.S. 93 bypass route to be another major priority, and he believes it is related to the success of development in the core area.

"I need to make sure that happens," he said. "We can't fall asleep at the wheel. We need that bypass."

As it stands, the portion of the bypass between U.S. 2 and Reserve Loop is slated to be finished over the next three years, completing the entire alternative route on the western side of the city. But Johnson said he believes the city should pursue additional improvements such as enlarging the roundabouts on the southern half of the route to make them more usable by semi-trucks.

Anything to encourage trucks to use the bypass rather than Main and Idaho streets would go a long way toward making the core area an attractive place for people to be, Johnson said.

Development is expected to continue on the north and south ends of town, and Johnson said he believes that is going to continue changing the nature of the Flathead Valley and its attractiveness as a place to live.

"I see it driving a lot of other [economic] traffic. It will be a key driver for in-migration to the valley," he said.

Johnson does not see any controversial issues for the council on the horizon, but he anticipates divisive things will eventually come up.

"I don't try to avoid divisive issues, but I try to learn from them to better govern," he said. "Healthy government is exhibited by close votes."

When there is a close vote, either by voters or the council, Johnson said it's the mayor's job to move forward and implement the decision. "They have spoken," he said.

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